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Leadership Competency Series

Right Feedback Can Boost Employee Morale

Learning curve drops as one climbs up the career ladder, challenging leaders to choose the right method of feedback for employee competency development at different levels. Successful leaders groom their successors on clear understanding of human levels of ego state and use appropriate methods suitable for individual development, says M R Chandramowly.

ONE nightfall a man travelling on a horseback towards the sea reached an inn by the roadside. He dismounted and, confident like all riders towards the sea, he tied his horse to a tree beside the door and entered the inn.

At midnight, when all were asleep, a thief came and stole the traveller's horse. In the morning the man awoke, and discovered that his horse was stolen. He grieved for his horse. Then his fellow lodgers came and stood around him and began to talk. The first man said, "How foolish of you to tie your horse outside the stable." The second said, "Still more foolish, without even hobbling the horse!" Third man said, "It is stupid at best to travel to the sea on horseback." And the fourth said, "Only the indolent and the slow of foot own horses."

Then the traveller was much astonished. At last he cried, "My friends, because my horse was stolen, you have hastened one and all to tell me my faults and my shortcomings. But strange, not one word of reproach have you uttered about the man who stole my horse." (The Forerunner -By Khalil Gibran)

People dislike direct correction:

It is easy to provide suggestions but more difficult to implement the same when one is under distress. This awareness is important for leaders and managers, especially during performance feedback when they sit to decide development plans for their team members. What the co-travellers said in the Gibran's story might have truth in it, but direct correction hurts the ego. No one would accept impairing of ego. A doorman has his own self-respect and nurtures his ego. The same is true too with a Chairman. Ego is a self-identity and is not based on level or grade. Shri Prakash Yogi (Pathanjali Yogashrama) proves it to participative members, about this truth authentically declaring "Do not directly correct anyone". Direct correction challenges the ego. When the ego is touched on, all the rest is forgotten but the hurt.

In the corporate world and in many organisational work situations we have different types of people in varied levels of hierarchy and skill sets. Leaders follow a set of principles and methods to provide feedback to their team members. The managerial science of feedback at times may not be sufficient to get better results if one fails to understand and apply the individual specific human side. Just following the rules of HR without human understanding could be disastrous. Managers, before they embark on feed back sharing, conventional or the one like 360 degrees, must know and decide how to provide feedback, how not to make it direct but still ensure to provide it effectively.

The 'A B C D' types and 'G B C' method:

For people development purposes, employees can be grouped into three types based on learning ability and state of ego complex. Type "A" people are those who are blind of their shortcomings. They are unaware of their competency gaps. It is easy for others to reflect upon them. When they discover their gaps, they quickly learn. The "B" type members know their shortcomings, but they do not put forth effort to change themselves. They need some support, a friendly nudge or tickle to bring corrections to their actions or behaviours. The third, "C" type people are well aware of their weak areas and are struggling to come over it. They know how to come out but are unable to fill gaps effectively. They normally hesitate to take feedback and they generally do not seek any feedback. They know what comes out of it and are sure that it hurts their pride. D type is where they know their problems and have settled down with those weaknesses believing that they cannot be changed. They have locked themselves in. They do not want all others to know about their dark spots.

To provide feed back for these A, B, C, D types, a feedback method, which I would like to call it as G-B-C, can be applied. GBC stands for grapes, banana and coconut. I derived this development differential from my studentship of poetics during my post graduation. The grapes technique is suitable for category A. They have not tasted the sweet of knowledge. They do not know how to get in to that. The manager, like a dentist, asks his team member to say "A…h". The mouth opens. Manager picks up a grape fruit, a seedless one, and throws it in. Without much of effort, the associate bites in to the fruit, breaking the small bag of juice feasting his taste buds. A quick and fruitful learning is accomplished. A smart manager by creating a "real situation" can demonstrate learning, making others to understand the objective, without much lecturing on it. His objective is to make his associate understand the developmental need. He does not feel it necessary to directly point out flaws and shortcomings.

Nehru's magic way

I recall hearing this interesting anecdote from my father. Once, in a dinner meeting with the viceroy, Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru noticed his fellow member pocketing silver spoons. The member was an important person and nonetheless, the mistake has to be corrected to avoid any further embarrassment. Nehruji merrily called out the group for demonstrating a magic. He took hold of a silver spoon and declared that he would put that spoon in his left coat pocket and the same spoon would come out from the right coat pocket of his friend. While silently dropping his own spoon, he took out the stolen spoon from the coat pocket of his friend. That saved the situation. Message was clear to his friend who was saved from disgrace.

For the type B, direct feedback is hazardous. They know the grape trick. They won't like you, if you show them the right way. They would say, "Yes, I knew it; I can also do it, I had thought of that earlier, so on and so forth."

Leaders give a little task filled feedback to this type. They do not provide the kernel directly but give it with a shield to uncover. When the banana is pealed, one would have the satisfaction of preparing his fruit for himself or discovering the solution with ease.

The hard coconuts

The C and D category people are highly knowledgeable. When knowledge becomes heavy, learning curve drops. It is difficult to influence and teach them. For them, listening is an activity of subordinate and lurid communication is mistakenly a winning leadership trait. The right feedback style for this type is "Coconut method". The contents are furtive with hard opaque cover. They need to work on it to break the coconut.

Learning objective is mostly similar for all the types. What is different in it is to choose the right training method suitable to their level. Learning objective in most of such cases could be one area of "self management" that requires change in attitude or behaviour. The "grapes way" is suitable for threshold level of employees, who are fresh, energetic and open for learning. They can learn it "on the job" or can be taught using in-house training or coaching. The "banana way" creates a task that needs little effort of removing the skin. The distractions are to be minimised. The participants are normally taken out for training without the day-to-day surroundings, tasks and interruptions. The coconut way, for the C or D type is little difficult. Experts prefer to take them out to a hill station or an Island.

Three principles of feedback

There are some fundamental principles for feedback. The first one, in reality, no one seriously considers your opinion about his or her self-development areas. They know it themselves. They look out for your analysis of how their deficiency hinders

personal growth and how their competency gaps stall their progress. It does no good for them to hear that they are short tempered. If you help them to reflect on some real incidents and losses they have suffered, that would be sufficient. They peal out the layer on your hint. They discover the real cause, which is their emotional behaviour that created the havoc. Analysis is lot harder than opinion. Though it is scary to contribute your analysis to a colleague's proposal, it's still absolutely necessary.

The second principle of feed back is to choose the right timing. To say the right thing at the right time. When a new software engineer is struggling to create a data code, he is falling out at times. The process gets delayed. What does he require at that time? A gentle nudge or some guidance. Pointing him out in front of other team members; if his supervisor says "You are really slow. In this rate, you will never be able to complete this project on schedule." The damage is hardly repairable.

The third principle? If you have something good to say, please say it. We rarely hear a manager prefacing his feedback with "That was a really good piece of work" or "This is one of the best ideas I ever heard in these days". By saying nice things, first a manager puts himself alongside of his associate. This empowers him to provide constructive criticism which mostly will be accepted. It also makes an associate to volunteer for feedback.

Which water is suitable to cook which pulse?

Boil it to a degree or put it on grills?

Why accuse the object without knowing this?

That's the nature's secret we often miss !

(Dr D.V.G's Kagga -160)

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